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Yukon-Charley Rivers Wolf Numbers Decline

The number of wolves in Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve has decreased by more than 50 percent from fall 2012, according to biologists who took advantage of late winter snow conditions to fly surveys of the 2.5 million acre conservation area. The drop is substantially more than normal and coincides with predator control efforts by Alaska Department of Fish and Game conducted near the preserve.

This fall-to-spring drop in the number of wolves which den or spend a portion of their lives in the national preserve appears to be the highest on record. Based on 20 years of data for wolves that use Yukon-Charley Rivers, a typical drop over the winter is in the 11% to 37% range. That decline comes from a mix of traditional hunting and trapping both in and out of the national preserve, starvation and other natural mortality.

In November 2012 NPS biologists counted 80 wolves in nine packs; going into the spring pupping season, biologists could account for between 28 and 39 wolves in six packs. Hunting and trapping typically results in about a half-dozen or fewer wolf kills each fall and winter. The majority of wolves that were killed this winter are believed to have been part of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game's aerial predator control program outside and adjacent to the preserve.

"We've had no formal communication from the State of Alaska on results of their helicopter and fixed-wing predator control work in the Fortymile country," said Yukon-Charley Rivers Superintendent Greg Dudgeon. "But through informal conversations we understand they were focusing efforts in the areas outside the preserve. The NPS role is to keep the preserve ecosystem, of which wolves are a part, functioning as naturally as possible."

Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve was established by Congress in the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, in part to "maintain the environmental integrity of the entire Charley River Basin... in its undeveloped natural condition for public benefit and scientific study; to protect habitat for, and populations of, fish and wildlife, including... wolves." NPS policies aim to maintain natural processes, wildlife abundance and diversity, natural wildlife behavior, and not reduce a native species for the benefit of a harvested species.

“We manage Yukon-Charley Rivers and other National Park Service areas in a manner that maintains the natural dynamics of a relatively undisturbed ecosystem,” said Deb Cooper, NPS associate regional director. “The State of Alaska has a very different mandate with goals to reduce wolf and bear populations in hopes of growing more caribou and moose for hunters. In places like Yukon-Charley Rivers, our two very different mandates bump into each other, and meeting the purposes of these differing frameworks is a challenge for both agencies.”

National Park Service managers will be closely watching this summer’s production of wolf pups and considering whether it will be necessary to impose a delay in the opening of the fall sport season for wolf hunting and trapping. “Looking ahead, we’ll attempt to determine if this year’s decline in wolves has put us in a position of needing to take a necessary conservation action,” Dudgeon said. “Our intent is to preserve the environmental integrity envisioned by Congress when it established the preserve. “

National Park Service researchers will also look at the preserve’s prey populations. The State of Alaska has reached its population objectives for two of three moose populations in the upper Yukon-Tanana Rivers area, as well as for the Fortymile Caribou Herd. A 2012 state research report, supported in part by the National Park Service, cautioned that signs of nutritional stress are being seen in the caribou herd, and signs of potential overgrazing have been observed in the herd’s core upland tundra range, which includes portions of Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve.

Traditional hunting and trapping within the Preserve are not in conflict with the NPS mandate of conserving natural processes and managing for natural abundance. “Hunting and trapping are significant activities in Yukon-Charley Rivers, and an important part of our heritage,” Dudgeon said. “Offering sport and subsistence hunting opportunities in a place that retains its essential natural character and the ecosystem benefits of natural predator-prey dynamics is part of our mission.

“Preserving those qualities - alongside traditional recreation and subsistence practices - was a mandate from Congress more than 30 years ago. We hope to continue working with the State of Alaska to find ways to meet our respective missions. The National Park Service will continue to manage this public land unit consistent with our Congressional mandates.”

Additional information on predator and prey species in Yukon-Charley Rivers is available at www.nps.gov/yuch.

The report on the Forty Mile caribou research is here:
http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/home/library/pdfs/wildlife/research_pdfs/wtb_14_fortymile_caribou_herd.pdf

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